



IMPRIMIS

Hillsdale College Hillsdale, Michigan 49242 Vol. 13, No. 1
January, 1984

IDEA FASHIONS OF THE EIGHTIES: AFTER MARX, WHAT?

By Tom Wolfe

Editor's Preview: Radical chic, that dubious intellectual fashion of the 1960s and early '70s which could set whole campuses aquiver with scorn for middle-class America, is gone. Some time before the Bicentennial, the country began to recover its spirit.

The turning point may have been Solzhenitsyn's devastating proof that utopian experiments with *a priori* morality inevitably end in totalitarian horrors. But while Marxism is clearly through as a spiritual force, no countervailing power has yet emerged to fill the vacuum of dominant ideas.

The same American impatience with philosophy and ideology that handicapped NASA with a "just because" explanation for its moon voyages has left defenders of democracy and capitalism ill-prepared to step in with fresh ideas now that socialism has fallen out of style.

Tom Wolfe used his keen eye and sure sense of values to paint a series of word pictures illustrating this problem for a Shavano Institute audience. It was an extraordinary hour, listening to Wolfe draw his colorful distinctions between "the right stuff" and the wrong. Here, in part, is how it went:

What I want to talk about today is something that my confreres in the world of literature and journalism resist: the notion that ideas can become articles of fashion which are adopted with no more foundation than styles in clothing. I see this as the key to the intellectual history of the United States in the twentieth century. Just in the last decade we have seen a tremendous change in styles of ideas.

The 1960s fashion I have called radical chic actually continued well into the 1970s; it didn't die with the end of the war in Vietnam. In 1974 I attended a conference at a university in the Great Plains, a conference called "America in the Year 2000." It was held in a typical student activity center, one of these great butter-almond-



colored buildings with expando-flex interior walls like accordions that are pulled back and forth by a night watchman in green balloon-seat twill pants. Here come the students in for the conference on "America in the Year 2000." They seem to me very lively, they are laughing, they are chattering to one another. Their veins are pumping with Shasta and Seven-Up. They are wearing bluejeans and bursting out of their down-filled Squaw Valley ski jackets. And no sooner do they settle down into their seats, than the keynote speaker of the conference, a young historian in a calfskin jacket and hair like Felix Mendelssohn's, looks down, and he says: "America is a leaden, life-denying society."

Well, it was one of the few perfect keynote addresses that I have ever heard, because it set the note for the next 36 hours as few such keynote addresses ever do. We were treated to a parade of speakers, each of whom filled in more dreadful details about American society. We were told that America is a country run by 60 families, 180

im•pri•mis (im-pry'-mis) adv. In the first place, from Latin *in primis*, among the first things...

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corporations, who control 95% of American wealth. We were told that every important decision is made by a small cabal of men who avoid publicity the way the werewolf avoids the dawn. We were told that due to the precipitous drop in the Gross National Product, the American veneer of freedom was no longer possible—that shortly the citizenry would be cowering in fear, awaiting that knock on the door in the dead of the night and that descent of the knout on the nape of the neck.

About Tom Wolfe

Tom Wolfe is one of America's leading social critics, bringing the so-called "New Journalism" to the level of a unique literary art form. Among his many celebrated books on popular culture are *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* and *Radical Chic and Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers*, both commenting on American life in the late 1960s and early '70s; *The Painted Word*, on modern art; and *From Bauhaus to our House*, on modern architecture. *The Right Stuff*, his best-selling chronicle on the astronauts and the U.S. space program, has become the year's most acclaimed movie.

Mr. Wolfe grew up in Richmond, Virginia, was graduated from Washington and Lee University, and took his doctorate at Yale. He has worked as a reporter for the *Springfield Union*, the *Washington Post*, and the *New York Herald Tribune*. He writes frequently for such magazines as *New York*, *Harper's* and *Esquire*.

Mr. Wolfe is a member of the Hillsdale Associates. This article is adapted from the transcript of his lecture at one of Hillsdale's Shavano seminars in Colorado in 1982. The illustration (reprinted by permission of the publisher, Farrar Straus and Giroux) is from his own book of drawings, *In Our Time*, which had its first formal publication party with a one-man show at Hillsdale College in 1980.



Wolfe mimics his self-portrait in Hillsdale gallery.

After 36 hours of this, it was all that I could do to bring myself to the last symposium in the conference, entitled, "The American Environment in the Year 2000." The prognosis was, as you might imagine, not altogether salutary. The first speaker was a young ecologist, who rose up and said, "Ladies and gentlemen, I am not sure that I want to be alive in America in the year 2000." He looked pretty lively at the time. He was about 37, he had on a magenta turtleneck disco jersey and a Madras jacket and a lot of other marvelous gear. The explanation of his dour prognosis was that due to the rape of the upper atmosphere by aerosol can users, a certain ion would no longer be able to come through the atmosphere to the earth, and this particular ion was indispensable for bone formation.

No more bone formation! Suddenly I had a vision that was worse than any that had come to me in the preceding 36 hours. I could see these marvelous women that I enjoyed watching walk down Lexington Avenue near where I live in New York City with their five-inch, pyramid-heel, three-color, patent-leather, platform-soled shoes, and their bluejeans smartly cleaving the declivities fore and aft, and I could suddenly picture them dissolving into blobs of patent leather and denim on the sidewalk, inching and suppurating along like amoebae. I could see the blind news dealer down at the corner of Lexington and Sixty-First Street trying to give change to a notions buyer from Bloomingdale's, and their hands run together like fettuccine over a stack of *New York Posts*. It was worse than anything I had ever imagined in my life.

Candide in Reverse

At this point, for the first time in the whole conference, a student spoke up. "I don't know if I should interrupt," he said, "but I just thought there is one thing I should tell you. I am a senior here at the university now, and for four years my professors have been telling me pretty much the same thing that you ladies and gentlemen have been saying all during this conference, namely that the end is near, everything is going down the chute, there is not much to hope for. But in all honesty I must tell you that the biggest problem we have run into here at the university in my four years is finding a parking place near the campus."

The ecologist looked at him to see if this was a wise guy, a troublemaker; but you couldn't really tell, so he decided to play it straight. He says, "Well, you have to understand that a university such as this is a middle-class institution, and middle-class institutions are set up precisely so as to...."

The student broke in and said, "I know that, I know that, they have told me that. But what I want to know is, how old are you usually when it all hits you?" And then you could see that he was not a troublemaker. He was not a wise guy. He was someone who had planned to go back to Omaha or wherever and take a perfectly normal job, and he was afraid that one day he would be

walking down the street and, as if they were ten-pin balls rolling off the roof, he would suddenly be wiped out by war, repression, pestilence, and the rest of the apocalyptic horsemen. He just wondered how this all came about. I could see that I was in the presence of a *Candide* in reverse. The original *Candide* was always told by Dr. Pangloss that he lived in the best of all possible worlds, and then everything went wrong. This young man had been told, and he believed it, that everything was going wrong—and yet he seemed to be living in the best of all possible worlds, and he couldn't explain it.



"The keynote speaker looks down and says, 'America is a leaden, life-denying society.'"

Confronting the Gulag

As late as 1974, this was intellectual fashion in the United States. Yet by 1976, instead of staging what I thought might be a cynical Bicentennial, writers and artists brought an almost positive spirit to the Bicentennial. They did not stage a riotous celebration, but there was a fairly good spirit. Something had happened.

I think the thing that did it was the publication in 1973 of the first volume of Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*.

That book had an impact on intellectual life in the United States and throughout the West of a sort that is difficult to measure this early in the game, but which I have no doubt whatsoever was quite profound. What that book did was to establish the fact once and for all that there was in the Soviet Union a network of concentration camps. This was not the first book to say the camps existed. Robert Conquest in England had documented the existence of this network of concentration camps; but he did so mainly by using the testimony of refugees, and we happen to live in a time when people do not believe the testimony of refugees in most cases.

But Solzhenitsyn came from within the Soviet Union, and he came with the blessing of Nikita Khrushchev himself. Khrushchev had made a grave tactical error in the matter of Alexander Solzhenitsyn. He had, in effect, for his own internal political purposes, put his arms around Solzhenitsyn at the time of the publication of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. He had said, first, yes, this book can be published; and second, it can be published because it's true that these things happened. (The implication, of course, was that they would not happen again since Khrushchev was now there instead of Stalin.) This gave an authenticity to Solzhenitsyn's words which could not then be withdrawn.

Solzhenitsyn's series of books on the Gulag not only established the existence of a network of concentration camps in the Soviet Union but also proved that the concentration camps were not the product of the madman Stalin. That had always been the excuse: any time appalling things happened in Czechoslovakia or Hungary, it was always, "This is the legacy of the madman Stalin, who took socialism on a wrong turn."

But Solzhenitsyn was saying that it didn't start with Stalin. It could easily be traced back as far as Lenin. Lenin, it turns out, is the man who *invented* the term concentration camps—not Hitler, but Lenin. His first act was to destroy all student political opposition within the Soviet Union by putting people into places you and I would call prisons, but which Lenin preferred to call "concentrations" of people being detained for their own good and the good of the society.

Solzhenitsyn went further, however. He said you cannot blame it on Lenin, you cannot even blame it on Marx; you have to trace it back to its root cause. And the root cause in his estimation was any system of *a priori* morality in which a group of men decide, "Morality starts here. We sweep away the moral basis of the past, morality starts here. We start morality from zero." Solzhenitsyn showed that you cannot start morality from zero because such a course inevitably leads straight to the concentration camps.

Since 1973, since *The Gulag Archipelago*, Marxism has been through as a spiritual force in the world. Marxism has never been a very powerful ideology in the United States. We have not been very good ideologues. Somehow we don't seem to be able to sit still for the Flemish bonding of the dialectic. Even people on the Left in America seem to be unable or unwilling to go through that tight logical process which has come to have such a hold on intellectuals in Europe. Instead, we have had a Marxist mist. There was always a Marxist mist over the next hill, a fuzzy glow by the light of which one could judge every solution that was tried in our particular form of democracy. But *The Gulag Archipelago*, with dramatic effectiveness, began to dispel that mist as the environment in which attacks on American democracy, particularly attacks from within the United States itself, could originate.

The arrival of Solzhenitsyn in this country in 1975 was quite an event as well. No one was prepared to see him. He was like an invisible man leading an invisible funeral through the United States. He came here on the arm of George Meany of the AFL-CIO. No one in the American literary establishment then or now had anything to do with Solzhenitsyn. He lives in this country, up in Vermont; yet no overture is ever made. *The New York Times* would not cover his two major speeches until they were just humiliated into doing so by one of their reporters, Hilton Kramer—a man I have made fun of in matters of art history, but to whom I have to take off my hat in the Solzhenitsyn affair.

But someone else who ignored Solzhenitsyn was the then President, Gerald Ford. He was invited by the AFL-CIO to Solzhenitsyn's speech in Washington, and he said that he had a prior engagement with one of his daughters. I think it is touching that there should still be such strong family bonds this late in the twentieth century, but I also think that this is one of the major mistakes the man ever made as President of the United States. It came, apparently, through an agreement reached under the spell of detente by Henry Kissinger with the Soviets, that our government would look the other way when Alexander Solzhenitsyn arrived, which our government did.

Vacuum of Fashionable Ideas

Today Marxism still exists. Marxists still exist. The spiritual force, however, has gone out of it. No one any longer looks to Marxism in a religious way, as was done for years even by people who were not Marxists. The tenacity of Marxism can still be seen all over the campuses, but in what are usually amusing and not very threatening ways.

In architecture, for example, there is the new theory of rationalism, which comes to us from Italy. This is Marxism which has gone beyond baroque, into its mannerist phase. It holds that architects must go back before the eighteenth century, back to the Renaissance for their forms. In other words, back to an era that was not tainted by capitalism. So rationalist architects in Italy take Renaissance buildings and strip them of all ornament, so that they are no longer overtly upper class, and then use what is left. You end up with eerie-looking buildings which have great thick walls with square window openings, and they look a bit like fortresses or jails. You can ask these people, "Why do you go back to the Renaissance, back to a time when buildings were built by monarchs and noblemen, many of whom were tyrants, despots?" They'll say, "Ah—at least they weren't capitalists." That's one form of mannerist Marxism.

In the college philosophy and literature departments, the reigning concepts are things like constructivism and deconstruction, both borrowed from France. The constructivists—in an age of collisions of the races, explosions of the metropoli, wars so big they are known as world wars—debate endlessly about the meaning of struc-

ture and the structure of meaning. The deconstructionists tear down the structure of meaning and the meaning of structure at night, the constructivists build it up the next day. The basic underpinning of it is their contention that words and language as they have evolved in the West have been developed to serve the economic masters. It is the goal of both the constructivists and the deconstructionists to unmask the language apparatus and expose it for what it is.

Why would academicians in America be so enamored of ideas such as constructivism or rationalism? I think it has nothing to do with any basic liking for Marxism. It has to do with our colonial complex in the realm of ideas. To this day Americans in the arts, in literature, and to some extent in journalism, believe that in Europe they do it better, with more elegance, more refinement, more sophistication. In every other sector of life we have written our declarations of independence. In the area of the arts and the cultural life generally, we remain the last little obedient colonists passively worshipping European ideas. The Europeans haven't asked to be worshipped. People here have taken it upon themselves to bow down and accept these ideas.

Various efforts have been made to fill the post-Marxist vacuum. The Left in this country is pretty well exhausted, and it knows it. It keeps trying to coalesce around some new cause or grievance, but without much success. One good example was the American Writers Congress at the Hotel Roosevelt in 1981—a reunion of nostalgic New Dealers bemoaning what they called "self-censorship" among novelists, poets, and playwrights in the United States, thanks to commercialism in publishing.

Somehow self-censorship is not quite comparable to the other kind, however. It was so transparently silly to have a conference on the subject of self-censorship that almost all organs that covered the event ended up giving considerable space to the counter-manifesto distributed by the Committee for the Free World, Norman Podhoretz's organization, which sharply contrasted the state of censorship in Poland and censorship in the age of the conglomerates at the Hotel Roosevelt.

Countervailing Forces

This episode indicates, I think, that it is no longer possible for the fashions that we have known to hold sway. They just can't march into the vacuum and take over any more. There are now countervailing forces. It was interesting to me that the makers of the movie "Reds" felt obliged to point out toward the end of the picture that what had begun as the altogether hopeful Soviet revolution had ended up as an authoritarian regime. Pointing out that rather obvious fact would have been considered a form of rightwing gaucherie within the movie business a decade ago. One of the few pictures made about the New Left and the campus protests of the 1960s was a picture called "The Strawberry Statement," which by and large was quite enthusiastic about the

movement, but which did take some pains to show that many people had joined the movement for frivolous reasons—to have a good time, to smoke a little dope, to get drunk, to score a few points with a girlfriend. The makers of that film were vilified as people who were poisoning the revolution. Now things have changed. The fashion has changed very rapidly in the last decade, even in the last five years.

But now we come to the question. "What are the countervailing forces?" The Left is now attempting to form behind an anti-business, anti-science, anti-nuclear banner. Socialism remains the goal, of course, but this is not a time in which anyone can present a socialist program by that name. But as these old forces regroup, what are going to be the countervailing forces? I am not at all sure.

This country has always lacked professional philosophers who would take it upon themselves to articulate in some structured form the foundations of American democracy, this system of ours which a couple of hundred years ago was an extremely novel thing in the world. Unless there are treatises that I'm not giving due credit, or of which I am not aware, we haven't had a great deal since the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution—which are after all not philosophical documents either; they are platforms and rules.

When I was working on *The Right Stuff*, I realized that NASA had no philosophy of the exploration of space. We have never had a philosophy of why we are going into space, except to counter the Russians. At the beginning of the space program that was enough. All you had to say was, "We must make sure that we capture the high ground of space," and you didn't need to tell Congress or anyone else anything more. But when you reached 1969, 1970, and later, you could see what the lack of a philosophy has cost NASA.

NASA has nothing to say, for the most part, except: "Well, we brought you the Teflon frying pan, we brought you a ballpoint pen that writes in a weightless environment, we have a computerized system that makes it unnecessary for doctors to make housecalls." Just what we needed. NASA has been driven to this through the lack of a philosophy—reduced to coming up with all the practical reasons why we should explore space, whereas the philosophical reasons, which might be along the lines of opening up the rest of the universe, rather interesting ideas such as that, are never presented. The one philosopher that NASA had was Wernher von Braun, and, since he had first risen to eminence in rocketry under the Nazis, he was not exactly the best man to bring forth and say, "Here's our philosopher." Operations at the Cape were run by another German, Kurt Debus, who happened to have an even deeper accent than von Braun, as well as what appeared to be a Heidelberg dueling scar on his cheek.

For Want of a Philosophy

And so finally, on the eve of the launch of Apollo 11, when Neil Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin, and Mike Collins were going up to land on the moon, Ralph Abernathy's Poor People's March headed for the Cape. Abernathy & Co. had their arguments worked out, which were, "We have millions of poor people in America, and you're spending billions to send people to the moon for no purpose; how can you justify yourself?" And a wagon train with Abernathy at the lead finally reached the Cape the day before the launch. Now NASA was in a tremendous hole, because NASA had no philosophy. No one had the nineteenth-century preacher's zeal to march up to anyone confronting him and say, "I'll tell you what we stand for. We're going to explore the rest of the universe on behalf of all mankind." There was nobody who would dare make such a statement, even if it ever occurred to him.

Beyond this, NASA, being a completely civilian enterprise, had no armed forces defending their installations, so down at Cape Canaveral they hired the Wackenhut organization. Wackenhut recruited its guards from Florida farm boys, and half of them looked like they had not made it in the shape-up for the movie "In the Heat of the Night."

So they thought up a very adroit strategy instead. Thomas Paine, the administrator of NASA, and Julian Scheer, the public affairs officer, decided that they would have Paine—a rather inconspicuous looking (though very dynamic) old World War II submarine officer—stand out alone in a field in a business suit, a sack suit. And while the television cameras zeroed in, while the Poor People's March arrived with bullhorns, Ralph Abernathy began to deliver a speech to this poor man standing out there all alone in the middle of a field; and suddenly the tables were turned. You had this colossal army with wagon trains and bullhorns and legions of people, facing one man in a gray sack suit. It was as if it were an unequal contest, and that defused the whole thing, and the launch went off on schedule. Now this was a brilliant public relations maneuver, but it would have been unnecessary if NASA had been armed with a philosophy, because philosophies tend to give people strength and confidence.

There is a general lack of a philosophy for anyone now on the Right to enter the intellectual vacuum with. There are no counterparts in the United States to France's Bernard-Henri Levy and his confreres, the so-called New Philosophers. They are formal philosophers who are able to put over abstract ideas in an exciting way. And they understand intellectual chic. They understand fashion. Bernard-Henri Levy looks like the young Vittorio Gassmann. He is about six-foot-four, with flowing black hair. He also has impeccable credentials. He was on the Left for a while; he was on the barricades during the 1968 uprisings in Paris. Then his whole outlook was changed by *The Gulag Archipelago*.

He is a remarkable public speaker. I saw him at NYU

in New York when he arrived there for a lecture, and he is the greatest lectern smoker since Mark Twain. Twain used to do great things with cigars. Bernard-Henri Levy smokes Benson & Hedges 800s, tremendous long skinny cigarettes, and he can talk and punctuate his conversations with jet streams from the nose, from the mouth, from the ears, the eyes, and he has a way of punctuating his remarks by tapping the enormous ash of his cigarette into an ashtray. The night I saw him at NYU they had not provided him with an ashtray; all there was was the bare floor of the dias where he was standing. And it became a fascinating spectacle: This man speaking, blowing smoke through every aperture in the human head, and tapping these ashes which were now hitting the floor; but he was so good at it that every successive ash hit exactly on top of the other one and began forming a conical pyramid. And at the end of his talk everyone rose up and applauded. I never knew whether it was over the brilliance of his presentation—he was in a very hostile room, there at NYU—or whether it was the feat of making a whole Benson & Hedges 800 stack up into one cone.

Acts of Inspiration

Also, the man has confidence. We are in an age that belongs to monomaniacs. Confidence is everything. In an age when people's values are so unsettled, when their outlooks are so uncertain, when they all make imaginary snowballs day and night, "on the one hand and on the other hand," somebody who is absolutely sure of his position is apt to carry the day. Thus when Bernard-Henri Levy would be challenged from the audience, when somebody would say, "You don't seem to realize what Marx said in his letter concerning the Ukrainian Communist Party..." Bernard-Henri Levy would interrupt and say, "Sir, *you* had better know *exactly* what Marx said, otherwise after your question you will not want to be in the same room with me much longer." You had the impression of a man with encyclopedic knowledge. But most of all he had confidence, and I submit that such

confidence comes from philosophical certainty.

There is no way that anyone can just say, "Well, let's get a philosopher, and the problem is on the way to being solved." You just can't do that. The great philosophers, I think, have been like the great artists. Their formulations have been as much acts of passion as cerebration, as much acts of inspiration as rationalization, and such things cannot be custom ordered. But there are certain things that are not being done which could be done and would be very useful.

For example, until Solzhenitsyn, it didn't dawn on anyone that we have no history of the Soviet Union since 1917. That history doesn't exist. Solzhenitsyn is trying to write it now, in nonfiction and in fictional form. We have no history of Eastern Europe since the Second World War. I think it is going to begin to dawn on people what the lack of that history means—a lack, incidentally, that was prophesied by George Orwell in his book *1984*. As a result, we don't have much artistic material, we don't have the dramas, we don't have the movies that portray these worlds.

But above all—and here I will stop—we do not have the philosophy and the confidence that goes with it. Once you have that, you will find that problems such as the attitude of television networks simply fall into place very rapidly. I know a lot of people in television and they are not ideologues. They have their fingers in the wind. In a way television, being a new medium, is the intellectual slums; and the networks are full of people who yearn for a higher intellectual status. So if the leading intellectual lights of America say a certain thing about some national issue, this same view will naturally be echoed on television.

These things happen in the realm of ideas, not in the realm of conventional politics. The philosophy and the confidence that goes with it—these are everything. The age belongs to the monomaniacs.



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